Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/421757338

Downloaded on Mar 29, 2024

4
Lively Arts People

The Saturday Gazette
Lively Arts
Pages 39 to 50

A FINE LAST STAND FOR THE BAND

1. Preview

SAN FRANCISCO — It was the eve of The Band's last concert and Robbie Robertson, the Toronto-born guitarist and composer for rock's most respected group, was asked how it felt to face the end, after 16 long years on the road. A slight smile creased his pale, gaunt face. "Well, it feels a little crazy . . . but things seem to be slipping into the pockets nicely."

The "last waltz" for this venerable group, the band that backed Dylan, was played Thursday — Thanksgiving Day in the U.S. — at Winterland, the creaky old ballroom where The Band first went public in 1969.

The Band decided to make this last concert stand — they will continue recording together until a final album is re-issued in the new year — a party for their friends. So they invited Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Eric Clapton, Neil Young, Muddy Waters, Van Morrison, Dr. John and other musical associates to share turkey dinner and a jam session with about 4,500 others who paid $25 a head to be witness to The Band's version of, in Robertson's words, "a New Orleans funeral."

The guests were a surprise — God only knew who was going to turn up — but the rehearsal Wednesday, before the grand event, was bona fide family gathering of rock'n'roll royalty.

They chatted quietly with each other, sipping their Coors beer, pricing the fatigue of orchestrating the most elaborate rock "party" ever staged.

Bob Dylan: 6,000 pieces of lox

For starters, the backdrop — huge chandeliers and red drapes, the set for *La Traviata* — was rented from the San Francisco Opera Company. The camera positions for the "home movie" of the event were being set up by three Oscarwinning cameramen under the direction of another friend of The Band, Martin Scorsese of *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* fame, a slight, neatly bearded young man who could be spotted lurking in the old theatre and wearing a sly smile.

The previous night's rehearsal had run until 5 a.m. and so the final tune-up was slow to get. "It'll be ready by this morning," Robertson assured, staring blankly from the stage at the scene of small pockets of people — star musicians, technicians and the journalists who had just flown in from across the continent.

There was Joni Mitchell, from California via Saskatoon, slim, lithe, and slightly haggard, tossing her arms around Eric Clapton's lady friend Patti Boyd, formerly Mrs. George Harrison Beatle.

They looked older now, but the gleam was in their eyes. Clapton's were half closed. The great electric guitarist — old "slow-hand" — wore a chocolate brown stetson tipped back on his head.

Ronnie Hawkins — the Arkansas "king of hillbilly" who gave the band its start in 1958 when he set up camp in Toronto — wore a much larger stetson. He cut a natural roguish farm-hand figure. He toted a big cigar and even his beard seemed crusty — how he was enjoying himself.

The Band, his "Boys," were finally giving him the stage.

Kinky Freedman, the country-singing leader of The Texas Jewboys, floated by in a crimson fireman's hat, dark aviator glasses, a cow-gar, striped coat and red trousers.

Jodie was looking for a party; she had just boogied her way through two driving Band numbers, as had the usually elusive singer-songwriter Van Morrison. The Belfast-born hard looked trimmer than he has in years, while The Band appeared limp and relaxed in rehearsal, Morrison was pumping, fire in his eyes, as he sang *Turn It Up (Radio)*.

Joni Mitchell: California via Saskatchewan

Anticipation — for these die-hard rock 'n' rollers, this could be the party to end all parties — transcended the fatigue. Even Bill Graham, the toughest, hippest and most creative impresario in the business, wore a smile as he barked out suggestions.

The assembled knew that this was a last chance to party with the lightest, most expressive performing rock'n'roll band of all, who, after 16 years of playing everything from bars to opera halls in Ontario, the Deep South and Europe, had decided to pack up their rock 'n roll shoes while they were still on top.

For the occasion, Bob Dylan was contributing 6,000 pieces of lox, and the hypnotist who got a fevered, sick Robbie Robertson on stage at the original Winterland debut was coming back.

'Now honey, don't be late/I want to be there when THE BAND starts to play.' The words were from The Darktown Strutters Ball and they appeared on the cover of an album by a group called, simply, The Band. Thursday night, 5,000 friends and fans gathered in San Francisco to see the Band — the most respected group in rock — take to the stage for the last time.

Rodriguez

The Gazette's JUAN RODRIGUEZ was there for the music and the good-byes. He talked to Robbie Robertson, below, the group's enigmatic composer and guitarist, and he reports here on the beginnings, the years on the road and on the finale: Perhaps the greatest rock party ever staged, as Dylan, Van Morrison, Ringo Starr and the rest played the last waltz.

2. Genesis

How can I walk with this ball and chain?
How can I last in this hurricane?
Or is this part of man's evolution,
To be caught between truth and illusion?
— from *Forbidden Fruit* by Robbie Robertson

It's a long way from the nights when The Band — then The Hawks — could be caught rocking with Ronnie Hawkins on Toronto's Yonge Street strip or, further back, in the road-houses and whore-houses of the south.

Indeed, in those years The Band has traversed trails speeding from the pioneering rockabilly styles of Buddy Holly and Jerry Lee Lewis to the super-stardom of the 70s.

It's a long way from Ontario to Malibu, where the four Canadians of the quintet reside (Arkansas-born drummer Levon Helm, the only one of the group who is said to have not wanted to quit, has put down stakes in Woodstock, N.Y.).

The Band thrives on parodies and enigma. They are most decidedly "superstars" but they have gone their own way (with Dylan and Hawkins) touring whatever they felt like. They haven't sold as many records as most superstar groups, and they don't have "charisma" — but they are cloaked in mystery.

Their private lives are kept inside the family — and consequently their music is the most down-to-earth in all of rock. These Canadians and their Arkansas emigre have produced the most recognizably American popular music of the last decade.

And despite the corn-cosed country hick accents, The Band is the most literate group in rock. They are righ in the language and sounds of true rock'n'roll — its roots in blues and hillbilly — which they execute with operatic precision.

Robertson's songs— *The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down, The Weight, Tears Of Rage, Up On Cripple Creek, Stage Fright, Life Is A Carnival* — are a remarkably full expression of the richness of American tradition.

Blowing through their music, writes critic Greil Marcus in *Mystery Train*, "were spirits of acceptance and desire, rebellion and awe, raw excitement, good sex, open humor, a magic feel for history — and a determination to find morality and drama in an America we had met too often as a moralist."

All this on top of the burden of still being considered Bob Dylan's greatest collaborators, the band whose noise and fury burst pod Dylan onto thee popular scene.

Dylan has moved out to Malibu as well, where he had constructed a custom-made $2-million home. The Band settled for Shangri-La, their own studio, where their latest album, *Northern Lights-Southern Cross*, was recorded.

From the shores of Malibu comes this album which on first hearing doesn't sound significantly different from their others, but is the kind of work that produces a garland of musical gifts that flows as you get to know it. It is The Band's best album, one with their most "Canadian" song, *Acadian Driftwood*, with a French verse and a sublime, stylized Cajun structure.

3. The Waltz

Acadian driftwood, gypsy tailwind,
They call my home the land of snow
Canadian coldfront, mayor in,
What a way to ride, oh what a way to go.
— from *Acadian Driftwood* by Robbie Robertson

Shortly after 9 Thursday, with 5,000 Thanksgiving guests ready for sound, and Martin Scorsese's 43-member film crew in the wings (the diminutive figure flailing his arms with eye signals), the five members of The Band bounded on stage. They were dressed in black (as they were when they performed as the Hawks), with the exception of pianist-singer Richard Manuel, who inexplicably wore a loud plaid suit.

They launched into *Up On Cripple Creek*, a tale of good hard lovin' in the country. They were a hurricane of sound, its elements twisting with crazy counterpoints and flowing together with athletic ease.

Robertson, his angular face made up to accent the good looks, had a long red scarf dangling from his neck; he surged into a stance with his guitar, from which he authored electric motifs with a classically tense technique. No one sculpts phrases like Robertson. His clusters of single notes are excitingly different each time out.

Organist and multi-instrumentalist Garth Hudson, he of the great beard and cast-iron-stove belly, also put on a show. He mixed carnie with opera, referring to a variety of keyboards (but always anchored by the church tones of his organ), to create the nuwes of sound the that give The Band its inimitably mystical sound.

Ronnie Hawkins: At last, a place on the stage

As for bassist Rick Danko, he hitched himself to his instrument; his sunken eyes beaming at the audience and his limbs loose as a marionette, he delivered the famous "bottom" sound of The Band.

Finally, Levon — wiry, indefatigable, slapping out crazy rhythmic contortions.

They performed a dozen numbers and after 90 minutes, without stopping, they began inviting their parade of famous guests to get up and sing with them.

Ronnie Hawkins recalled the macho stage routines of an eon ago in *Who Do You Love*. Dr. John dipped into New Orleans honky tonk with *Such A Night*.

Paul Butterfield honked out *Mystery Train* on harmonica and his hero, the Chicago blues great Muddy Waters, came on to do *Caledonia* (The Band had helped Muddy on his recent Grammy-award-winning *Woodstock* album). Then Clapton took Muddy's blues and added his own hopeless romanticism.

Neil Young (Toronto sportswriter Scott Young's son) strolled on to wail *Helpless* and a tribute to another compatriot, Ian Tyson, *Four Strong Winds*, a popular hit long before anyone heard of folk rock. He was followed by Joni Mitchell, waving her body to the music. Neil Diamond — for whom Robertson produces discs — did a ballad, *Dry Your Eyes*, and Van Morrison — a big favorite in San Francisco — socked home a rousing *Toura Loura Loura*.

The Band closed off the first three hours with *Acadian Driftwood* and after a half-hour break charged back on stage again with *Chest Fever*, the one and only *Last Waltz*, and *The Weight*. Without stopping, Robbie said: "Here's Bob Dylan," and Dylan, wearing a big white hat and a black leather jacket, launched into *Baby Let Me Follow You Down*, arching his body with his guitar in mocking salute to Robertson.

Eric Clapton: He brought a former Mrs. Beatle

Dylan bit down hard on *Forever Young* and then, one by one, the whole cast walked on stage for a singalong on *I Shall Be Released*. Neil Young clutched deliriously at Joni Mitchell's shoulder, Dylan and Van Morrison shared the same microphone, and Levon and Robbie were punchy with trumpeel-up energy.

Finally, Robertson said: "Well, we're going to have a party," and pointed to Helm to start the jam session with a drum solo. They were joined by — among others — Ringo Starr, the Beatle, and Ron Wood, the Rolling Stone.

The last waltz ended with the tired, wrecked Band jumping into a hallcynic version of *Don't Do It, Don't Break My Heart*. What was left was a tiredness and a sadness that there would never be a communion like this again.

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com